Not too soon to address the elephant

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Too soon?

This phrase has become entrenched in the popular lexicon to mean a subject that is taboo because people are still sensitive to it. It is most frequently a joke intended to rescue the teller of a previous joke that bombed—ostensibly because it was inappropriate and not just unfunny—from a moment of awkwardness.

It is also, though, a way people actually deal with real situations that do need to be discussed. We often refer to ostriches with heads in sand and elephants in small rooms when faced with these topics.

The Fort McMurray wildfire is one such subject. Last week, Elizabeth May, leader of the federal Green Party, put her feet in it, so to speak, by allegedly linking that horrific disaster to climate change.

Tom Mulcair, leader of the NDP, who it could be noted occupies an overlapping political space with May, was quick to play the “too soon” card.

“It’s not the time to start laying blame,” he said.

That implies there will come a time to start laying blame. That’s probably not what he meant because it is not nor will it ever be a matter of laying blame. And it is not what May intended according to her “clarification.”

“Some reports have suggested that wildfires are directly caused by climate change,” she wrote. “No credible climate scientist would make that claim and neither do I.”

She is right, of course, no credible person would say the particular fire that recently devastated Fort Mack was caused directly by climate change. Wildfires are endemic to forested areas, particularly forested areas that have reached a certain level of maturity. They are, in fact, part of a natural cycle of renewal.

Unfortunately, human settlement has always had an uneasy relationship with Mother Nature. And it is likely to become even more strained because of climate change. Scientific consensus predicts the probability of extreme weather events will increase due to global warming.

What did directly cause the Fort McMurray fire was some source of ignition combined with unseasonably warm and dry conditions exacerbated by high winds. What caused unseasonably warm and dry conditions? Are these conditions likely to become more prevalent in the future? How are we going to protect ourselves from their consequences?

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau proved his diplomatic chops are becoming more refined day by day when he masterfully sidestepped the issue.

“Pointing at any one incident and saying well, this is because of that, is neither helpful nor particularly accurate,” Trudeau said in response to the Elizabeth May misstep.

In other words, “too soon.”

It wouldn’t be too soon if the fire had hit, say, Quadra Island, a community known partially for a famous occupant, climate change guru David Suzuki.

Fort McMurray has very different associations having sprung from the northern Alberta forest because of regional—and some would say dirty—oil wealth.

In times of disaster, it doesn’t matter whether you’re hippy dippy Quadra Island or in-your-face Fort Mack. Canadians step up to help their fellow citizens in times of need.

Political correctness does present us, however, with the awkward situation that any mention of climate change in the context of this particular disaster is akin to blaming Fort McMurray residents for their own woes.

That is ludicrous, of course, but if sensitivity shuts down needed dialogue, how do we learn for next time? There will be a next time.

The question is: if we are not going to talk about it now, then when?

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